

Traffic Safety News and Facts for Employers

Federal Regulators to Put SUVs through a Dynamic Rollover Test to Determine Roll Over Score

As controversy continues to swirl around the safety of sport-utility vehicles (SUVs), federal regulators are expected to start putting SUVs through an actual test rather than a mathematical simulation to determine how likely they are to roll over. But observers question whether such a test could duplicate what really happens on the road, since many factors contribute to rollover crashes. Finding a way to account for driver behavior, road conditions and vehicle characteristics when calculating a vehicle's rollover score would be a major hurdle as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) develops its first dynamic rollover test in the next couple of months. Testing could start as early as September, NHTSA said. Congress passed a bill requiring dynamic rollover testing after the 2000 recall of millions of Firestone tires of a type involved in deadly rollover crashes with the Ford Explorer. The latest rollover test will likely supplement the agency's existing "static stability" formula, which divides one-half of a vehicle's width by the height of its center of gravity to come up with its rollover score. Automakers largely disliked that formula because it was based on a mathematical calculation, not crash simulations. Automakers, nonetheless, are wary about the latest rollover test. They say it could misrepresent what happens in real-world crashes because rollover crashes can differ depending on several circumstances.

Drivers More Alert

Recent scientific research suggests that flowers, trees and other amenities break up a highway's monotonous visual pattern and may help brighten drivers' moods and keep them alert. "It's the changing of the patterns in the landscape that makes the difference," said Jody Rosenblatt-Naderi, a professor of landscape architecture at Texas A&M University. Rosenblatt-Naderi works in a lab with a rebuilt Saturn hooked up to a computer that simulates highway driving conditions and measures a driver's speed and reaction times. The simulator can alter the visual landscape, presenting three-dimensional images on screens that surround the driver. In studies so far, she's found that drivers are more alert and less likely to speed when they're cruising through park-like surroundings.

NHTSA Makes Decision to Include Warnings about Head Injury Risks in Vehicles that the Government Crash Tests

A federal decision to include warnings about head injury risks in vehicles that the government crash tests is creating potentially confusing safety information for consumers. Late last week, NHTSA gave its highest possible side-impact crash scores - five stars for the front and rear - but the agency added a footnote in each case. It says rear passengers could suffer serious or fatal head injuries. "There is little inconsistency there," says Brian O'Neill, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. The institute has designed a test for measuring how well cars and trucks protect crash dummies, especially their heads, in side impacts by higher-riding light trucks. It will be issuing its first results soon. NHTSA has gotten a jump on the institute in putting out alerts about head injuries. "I would hate to think they are motivated that way - although they might be, because they know that our system will score heads very heavily. So perhaps they don't want to be charged with ignoring head injury risk," O'Neill says. The government has no provision in either its motor vehicle safety standards or in its consumer information ratings for measuring the likelihood of head injuries on crash dummies in side-impact tests. But NHTSA reconfirms it is preparing to rewrite the government's side-impact safety standard to include head protection in side crashes.

AAA Released Survey Revealing that Most Drivers Admit They Take Risks

Americans for the most part are lousy drivers and know it. A national poll released last week shows that most drivers admit they routinely take risks. And the worst offenders, by their own admission, are ages 26-44 — not teens or seniors. "We're hurried, harried and stretched for time, and our bad driving habits show it," says Susan Pikralidas, a spokeswoman for AAA, which commissioned the poll with other highway safety advocates. The groups are pushing for drivers to voluntarily retest themselves with an online quiz and other measures. Most states require vision exams for license renewals. But far fewer test on rules, road signs or driving skills. Most motorists haven't passed a driving test since first getting a license.

- More than 70% own up to speeding. Driving 10 mph over the limit seems fine to one in five respondents.
- Almost one-third say they run red or yellow lights.
- cell phones are used while driving by 37%. Almost 60% eat in their cars. And 14% say they think reading behind the wheel is OK.
- About three-fourths say senior citizens and teens should be required to be retested. Fifty-seven percent say raising the minimum driving age to 18 from 16 would make roads safer.

U.K. Fleet Decision-Makers Under Renewed Pressure to Impose Strict Checks on Commercial Drivers Health Amid Warnings Due to Inconsistent & Inaccurate Labeling of Over-the-Counter Medicines

U.K. fleet decision-makers have come under renewed pressure to impose strict checks on business drivers' health this week amid warnings that labeling of some over-the-counter medicines is inconsistent, inaccurate and could be dangerous. A Department for Transport study, undertaken by Loughborough University's Sleep Research Unit, found the recommended range of advisory labels on medicines warning of possible drowsiness is not always followed closely by manufacturers. Ensuring drivers understand the dangers of certain medicines is vital, as research suggests fatigue may be responsible for up to one in 10 crashes on highways and up to one in 20 on other roadways. Furthermore, it is against the law to drive when under the influence of alcohol or drugs and the law makes no distinction between impairment due to illegal drugs and impairment due to medicinal drugs. The penalties are the same as for drinking and driving — disqualification for at least a year, a fine of up to £5,000 and up to six months' imprisonment. For more information, 'Over the Counter Medicines Liable to Cause Unwanted Sleepiness: Assessment of Package Warnings' is available from www.roads.dft.gov.uk/roadsafety/roadresearch/index.htm.

California Residents May See Legislation Passed to Prohibit Use of Hand-Held Phones While Driving

California residents are one step closer to having both hands on the wheel as they drive and talk on their cell phones — or else. Legislation co-written by Assemblymen Dario Frommer (D-Glendale) and Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto) would require drivers to keep hand-held cell phones away from their ears while driving passed the Assembly 49-27 this week. It is headed to the Senate for a vote. If passed, drivers would be required to use cellular hands-free technology, such as earpieces, while on the road or face fines for the infraction. The law would take effect in January 2005. "It's just a very reasonable measure," Frommer said. "All we are saying is get an earpiece so you are not holding a phone to your ear." Not all lawmakers have been so willing to let the law dictate such measures. "It's not the job of the legislature to single out cell-phone users for special punishment," Assemblyman Dave Cox, leader of the Assembly's Republican caucus, released in a statement.

Brown University Researchers Discover Fatigued Medical Residents Perform as Poorly as When Under the Influence of Alcohol

Brown University researchers discovered that fatigued medical residents, when placed in a driving simulator, performed at least as poorly as they did while under the influence of alcohol. The study results were presented at a recent conference of the Pediatric Academic Societies. The researchers took 15 residents and placed them in a driving simulator for 30 minutes to examine driving performance under a variety of conditions including, rested, sleep deprived and rested with alcohol. The results of the study suggest that the residents driving impairment under real-life conditions of sleep deprivation are equivalent or worse than impairment caused by moderate alcohol intoxication.

GAO Report Reviews State Highway Safety Program and Discusses NHTSA Oversight

A just released General Accounting Office (GAO) report provides trend data on highway safety, attempts to determine how much highway safety funding was provided to states and how those funds were used, and reviews NHTSA's oversight of highway safety programs oversight of highway safety programs. For more information, visit <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03474.pdf>.

UK Industry Experts Report Untrained Fleet Managers Cost their Employers

Untrained fleet managers could be costing their employers hundreds of thousands of pounds every year because they do not have the right skills to acquire and run company vehicles efficiently. U.K. Industry experts also believe the introduction of health and safety issues and corporate manslaughter legislation mean it is imperative that today's fleet manager is properly trained for the job. Automotive industry expert Professor Garel Rhys, of Cardiff Business School, said: 'Challenges facing the industry dictate that fleets need to be run by someone at director level who is properly trained. There are a lot of costs involved and fleets are a lifeline to business, so it is vitally important.

Cingular Wireless and Avis Announce the "Be Sensible" Promotion

You're in an unfamiliar place, driving a rental car and using your wireless phone. Cingular and Avis say, "Be Sensible!" Cingular Wireless, and Avis Rent A Car System, have announced a partnership to limit distractions and promote sensible driving while using a wireless device and driving a rental car. Key elements of the promotion include an online "Pledge to Be Sensible" offered to Avis customers, which earns them a free upgrade on their next rental and discounted accessories from Cingular. Braun Research recently completed a survey of 1,000 Americans who have rented a car in the last year. In terms of limiting distractions while driving a rental car, only 10 percent said they familiarize themselves with the vehicle before driving away. In addition, 89 percent said they did not check local laws on wireless phone use while driving before going on a trip.

Virginia Tech Psychologist Promotes the 'Courteous Communicator' as a Solution for Road Rage

A Virginia Tech psychologist thinks he has a way to deal with road rage, if only he could get other drivers to follow his lead. The idea seems plausible enough: Stick a tiny green light in back of every car, teach drivers to say "please" and "thank you" and "I'm sorry" with a series of quick flashes, and people will be less frustrated, less likely to run each other off the road. "If someone cuts in front of you, you think, 'He did it on purpose,'" Scott Geller said. "What if the person who cuts in front of you could quickly tell you 'I'm sorry'?" Truckers already do this, communicating with their headlights. But in most American cities commuters tend to keep to themselves and let the tension build, said Radford

University professor Jerry Beasley, who approached Geller with the idea for the light system. "We're trained on the road to be discourteous, to be aggressive," Beasley said. "People get in their cars, and

all of a sudden they've got a ton of power. And everything's in place to communicate violence _ people wanting to get somewhere before everyone else." Beasley, who teaches self-defense and martial arts at Radford, said he has been trying to develop an automobile communication system for years. After meeting Geller at a conference, the two developed a less cumbersome system they now call The Flash. The thumb-sized light is attached with Velcro to the rear window. Powered by the cigarette lighter, The Flash can be seen from the front and the back by pushing a remote control button. Geller has been testing the device for more than a year in his 1995 Mazda four-door, squeezing off flashes according to a simple code Beasley copywrote: one flash for "please," two for "thank you," three for "I'm sorry" and four for "Call 911." "Our goal is to make a case for doing this on a much larger scale," Geller said. "My vision is that automobile manufacturers would offer an option to have a 'Courteous Communicator' in your car."

OSHA Includes Motor Vehicle Crashes in New-Year Strategic Plan

Work-related motor vehicle crashes are included in the recently unveiled five-year strategic plan for Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The Strategic Management Plan is based on an analysis of the current safety and health landscape, occupational trends, emerging issues and agency priorities. John L. Henshaw, assistant secretary of labor for OSHA, unveiled the agency's new strategic management plan on Monday, May 12, 2003. According to an OSHA press statement, the plan covers issues not traditionally addressed by the agency but that nevertheless account for many work-related injuries such as work-related motor vehicle crashes. OSHA intends to use a variety of cooperative programs and outreach efforts to assist employers and employees in addressing the problem.